

Nan Bowman Albinski, *Women's Utopias in British and American Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1988. Pp. 192. £ 30.00

The author significantly begins her introduction with the question: "Why a separate study of women's utopian fiction?" and proceeds to answer it by arguing that men and women face different social realities. Albinski sees this social difference reflected in the thematic difference that women utopian writers more consistently question the *status quo* of gender relationship than their male counterparts, thus emphasizing the use of the genre as a critique of contemporary society. Albinski concentrates particularly on aspects that have immediate consequences for the status of women: the division of nature and culture and the ensuing identification of women with nature, the choice of family or paid employment, and finally technology as the means to liberate or enslave women.

Throughout the book her primary focus is on the political use of the genre and its relationship to the surrounding society. This focus also determines her definition of the literary terms that she finds useful in her comparison of the historical development of utopian writing: utopia denotes the genre, a utopia is "a vision of the good place," which provides the contrast to the dystopian warning of a future society and the anti-utopian satire on contemporary society. She categorizes the period 1880-1920 as a period dominated by utopian models for prescriptive change; 1920-1960 as characterized by dystopian writing, and 1960-1987 as attempting to balance dystopian and utopian visions for the future. These characteristic differences are accounted for by pointing to changes in the political and social climate of the period in question, especially changes in the politics and dominant issues of the women's movement. These three historical periods provide the overall structure of the book which is further subdivided into chapters describing the British or American visions of the different periods.

This structure makes possible an interesting comparison of the utopian visions of British and American women, differences that Albinski links with the differences between the national political traditions and the conditions for women. In particular, she points to the utopian communities in the United States as a practical testing ground for visions about communal living and the relationship between the two sexes. But the general overview of these differences at the beginning of each chapter does not compensate for Albinski's disappointingly meagre treatment of the literary works. Here she basically limits herself to summaries of the plots of a number of characteristic books of the period before the chapter concludes with a list of the primary material used. The book also includes a bibliography of secondary material on women's utopias.

The persistent subordination of the literary genre and the literary expression

to politics ultimately implies a place for Albinski's study as a reference book on women's utopian fiction or as an introduction to early feminist literary criticism. Its approach to literature as a simple reflection of society and politics has long ago been substituted by a more sophisticated feminist literary criticism that focuses on women's possibility to transform literary forms and culture as such rather than limiting themselves to the use of existing modes of expression.

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